PITTA

Newsletter of Deccan Birders (formerly Birdwatchers' Society of Andhra Pradesh)
New Series Volume 17 Number 3 March 2020

DECCAN BIRDERS EVENTS

In light of the Corona virus (COVID-19) epidemic, all Deccan Birders Field Trips and Indoor Meetings are on hold until further notice. Details of upcoming activities will be communicated once the situation improves.

Report: Asian Waterfowl Census at a few waterbodies around Hyderabad, January 2020

Text and Photos: Sravan Kumar R

Northern Shoveler

I had the opportunity to participate in the Asian Waterfowl Census at some of the waterbodies around Hyderabad this year. Some details of the trips are given below.

Manjeera catchment area

January 19, 2020

1. Manjeera Reservoir

This reservoir earlier catered to the water requirements of people of the twin cities of Hyderabad and Secunderabad. It is now in a situation where it is not just unable to fulfil these functions but also struggling to quench its own thirst. The reservoir area resembles a grassland with traces of water limited only to the canals dug deep in the catchment area and towards the dam gates. It is hard to believe that a once-thriving reservoir could be reduced to this state.

The reservoir catchment area once attracted and hosted many resident and migratory bird species around the year, but now there are hardly any birds there. During my visit, I recorded a few Grey Herons on the bank of the canal, Cattle and Intermediate Egrets, Little Cormorant, Purple Heron and two Wood Sandpipers. Due to the paucity of water, a few Mugger Crocodiles were also seen.

The Eucalyptus and Copperpod trees at the entry gate of the reservoir, which used to be the roosting place of Fruit Bats, have disappeared and no bats were seen in the location. In the bushes next to the EEC, the usual species like Small Minivet, Indian Golden Oriole, Tickell's Blue Flycatcher, Asian Paradise Flycatcher and White-breasted Waterhen were recorded. Also seen were Red-vented Bulbul, Asian Pied Starling, Green Bee-eater, Barn Swallow, Streak-throated Swallow, Red Avadavat, Scaly-breasted Munia, Little Swift and Dusky Crag Martin.

2. Tallapalli Waterbodies

Tallapalli

In a north-east direction from the Manjeera approach road, on the mud road behind the overhead water tank is a small lake with very shallow water and good growth of waterlilies (*Nymphae*). This lake had one Wood Sandpiper, one Common Sandpiper, two Little Grebes, two Indian Pond Herons, a Cattle Egret and a couple of Common Coots. Further ahead, on the left side to the road the paddy fields were being harvested, and this looked like a favourite habitat for Raptors/Harriers: we saw a Pied Harrier soaring and a Black-shouldered Kite on a nearby electric pole.

Greater Spotted Eagle adult (L) and juvenile (R)

Greater Spotted Eagle pale morph (*A. c. fulvescens*)

The mud road led to the Tallapalli *cheruvu* (lake), with less water level but with more shallow areas, and with Ipomea bushes towards the edges of the bund and open water to the centre of the water body. This appeared to host good numbers of birds; there were ducks visible behind the Ipomea bushes and a pair of Greater Spotted Eagles perching on the ground in the lake area. A Pied Harrier female and Eurasian Marsh Harrier were on the hunt.

Pied Harrier female

Eurasian Marsh Harrier

The lake had a good number of large waders: 44 Eurasian Spoonbills and some Great, Intermediate and Little Egrets. There were also Common Teals, Spot-billed Ducks, Garganey, Eurasian Wigeon, Little Stints and Kentish Plovers.

Garganey and Common Teal mixed flock

Little Stint

3. Kandi Cheruvu, Kandi

Moving back towards Hyderabad from Manjeera, Google Maps showed a waterbody on the left, approachable from the highway, so we decided to check it out. While the lake is actually quite large, there was very less water, and with no weeds around. The surrounding area looked deserted, but it seemed to be a popular venue for evening parties, as the lake side was littered with empty bottles and food parcels in the open scrub area. This lake provided us with a list of ~30 species of birds including Gadwall, Eurasian Wigeon, Eurasian Spoonbill, Black-winged Stilt, Grey Heron, Little Ringed Plover, Common Sandpiper, White Wagtail, Oriental Skylark, Indian Bushlark and Ashy-crowned Sparrow Lark.

Common Sandpiper

January 26, 2020

Each waterbody visited on this day was special, in terms of the list and the population of avian fauna they hosted. This induced me to record the conditions prevailing at locations and the conservation measures followed at some of these locations.

4. Annasagar, Jogipet, Medak

Our team of 4 members started very early in the morning in view of the distance to be covered. We planned to start our birding from the far side of Annasagar Lake. Reaching the location before sunrise, we stopped and had a good breakfast while waiting for the fog to disperse and the sun to rise higher. The hotel owners seemed to be fascinated with poultry species and had a collection of fowl of many varieties from various locations – for instance, the Turkey, Kadaknath (the black variety of chicken), along with some other native species of fowl, etc.

Bar-headed Goose and Lesser Whistling-duck

The first view of Annasagar filled me with pleasure and fulfilled my desire to see a waterbody filled with ducks! This lake had ducks of different species in large numbers, and Bar-headed Geese were also there in the hundreds.

Roosting trees at Annasagar

Humayun wanted to start the session from an earlier known heronry on the western edge of the waterbody. Unfortunately, those trees were now all gone, but another growth of trees closer to the water edge seemed to have been taken over by the birds and although we couldn't see any signs of nesting, it seemed a fairly large roosting spot for various species. We started enumerating the species and their individual counts at different stopover points all along the length of the waterbody.

Incoming flock of Eurasian Spoonbills

Suddenly, Gokul alerted us to a large flock of birds flying in, which turned out to be 67 Eurasian Spoonbills. We observed as they glided in and perched on the trees of the heronry. At another point, we observed a very interesting courtship behaviour among the Cotton Pygmy-geese: two males and a female were first seen together, with the two males continually flying at each other and apparently fighting. Then all three took off and made a round of the lake, returning to their original spot; once again, the two males started flying at each other, although the female now drifted off. The two males seemed to be very quarrelsome and continued to spar for a long time.

Cotton Pygmy-goose

Common Pochard

Throughout the time spent around the lake, Cormorants kept flying in, adding to the waterbody counts. It would be interesting to see where they might be coming from and if there are roosting areas nearby. After a short tea break, we moved on to the next waterbody, at Andole.

5. Andole Lake, Andole, Medak

Checkered Keelback

We reached Andole and started walking along the length of the waterbody to carry out the count. On the way, we came across a basking Checkered Keelback snake on the bund near some bushes, and it gave us a chance to click a few pictures.

Eurasian Marsh Harrier being mobbed by House Crow

Initially we saw nothing much on the water, other than a few Common Coots and Cotton Pygmy-geese. As we proceeded, however, a Eurasian Marsh Harrier quartering the lake disclosed the presence of Spot-billed Ducks and Lesser Whistling-ducks on an island with a lot of reeds around it.

Spot-billed Duck and Cotton Pygmy-goose

We also spotted a Greater Spotted Eagle perching on a tree on the opposite side of the waterbody. In this way, observing and counting as we went, we moved towards the other edge of the bund and reached a conduit where, behind a picturesquely located Roads & Buildings Department guest house (though in a dilapidated condition) we recorded a couple of Bluethroats hopping about in the bushes.

Bluethroat

Scoping the waterbody from this location, we could see an Osprey perching on what appeared to be a stout fishing stake. The bird was not easy to see even with the scope due to the distance and background.

Osprey landing at perch

6. Mehboobsagar, Sangareddy

There seems to be a lot of development on this lake for tourism activities. There is organized boating, as a result of which the lake has lost most of the reeds and grasses on the bund. The exception is on the east side, where the lake still has some Prosopis bushes outside the water line. The main bund serves as a viewpoint for the entire lake. The other side of the main bund has agricultural fields, where farmers are preparing for the next crop season. We observed that ploughing was in progress and good numbers of Egrets, Herons and Ibises had gathered in the fields and were foraging and following behind the ploughing tractors.

Egrets following a tractor

Initially the lake appeared empty and without any birds other than a few Indian Pond Herons, a Grey Heron and some Common Coots. After waiting for a while on the bund, the southern edge of the lake revealed a small white patch. Hindered by fog and with the sun being in the wrong direction, it was very difficult to see, but somehow we managed to view the Bar-headed Geese and Black-winged Stilts perched on the ground. A few Lesser Whistling-ducks in a small flock were also resting on the far side of the lake.

Zitting Cisticola

Beside the main lake, a small patch had reeds and Prosopis trees in it, and hosted a few Grey-headed Swamphens, Bronze-winged Jacanas, Common Coots, Lesser Whistling-ducks, Spot-billed Ducks and a few Little Cormorants. However, we also noted that this portion of the lake is acting as a sink hole with the trash it is accumulating from the neighbouring residential areas.

Grey-headed Swamphen

7. Nizam Talab, Nizampet

After lunch, while on our way back to the city, YSRK Prasad suggested we visit a waterbody which he frequently visits in his neighbourhood, known as Nizam Talab at Nizampet. It turned out to be well worth a visit.

Nizam Talab surrounded by a concrete jungle

The route passed through some urban and semi-urban areas, then on to a mud road, and we finally reached the location. On this side, the waterbody was bordered by the mud road with upcoming concrete structures nearby; on all the other sides, the concrete nests for humans were already established.

Northern Shoveler

The water level in the waterbody was good and one small corner was occupied by water hyacinth. But the rest of the water surface was full of Northern Shovelers in the hundreds, and a few Lesser Whistling-ducks, Grey-headed Swamphens, Common Moorhens and Common Coots. Prasad told us that this was the first year that he has observed such numbers of ducks on this waterbody.

Ducks at Nizam Talab

A sound of crackers blasting in the adjoining area suddenly disturbed the birds and several different flocks lifted into the air and were seen flying around the lake for about 20 minutes before returning to settle back on the waterbody. While scanning the flocks in flight, we witnessed a Black-headed Ibis which seemed to have got mixed up with the circling Shovelers. Since it could not fly in synchrony with the flocks, nor could it get out of their way, it was getting pushed about and had a hard time landing.

Black-headed Ibis amidst a flock of Northern Shovelers

My personal opinion is that these birds have picked this waterbody is an alternative for the Pragatinagar lake which, at present, has very low water levels. The boulders are all exposed, and the surface is now covered with dry and decomposing layer of water hyacinth with very few birds inhabiting it. It remains to be seen how secure the birds feel at this new location and whether they would continue to use it or would return to Pragatinagar in case its condition improves later.

8. Patancheru Lake, Patancheru, Medak

Located next to the ICRISAT campus and the industrial area of Patancheru, the lake is in use by the fishermen community for fish rearing. Within a span of one week, I visited this lake twice, on January 26 & 31, 2020. On both the visits we recorded almost the same avifauna: Common Coots in the hundreds dominated the waterbody, although more open waters are still vacant. We could see only five Northern Pintails (during both the visits) on the lake but, at the other end of the waterbody, towards the ICRISAT fields on the outer edge of the waterline, approximately 60 Red-wattled Lapwings and Cattle Egrets were observed perching in the Ipomea bushes.

We spent a little more time here, waiting for some action. Finally a Eurasian Marsh Harrier appeared, gliding over the water and swooping down to attack a Glossy Ibis.

Eurasian Marsh Harrier and Glossy Ibis

The Ibis was lucky to escape from the Harrier's grasp. I wondered if the Ibis did actually escape, or if it was because the Harrier was not that serious about that particular hunt, or whether it mistook the Ibis for some other prey and let go when it realized its error. Do Raptors make mistakes in identification?

Green Bee-eater

Red-vented Bulbul

After jotting down the birds in the bushes – Green Bee-eater, Red-vented Bulbul, Asian Koel, Rufous Treepie, Spotted & Eurasian Collared Dove, etc at this locality, we returned from the lake. On January 31, 2020, besides the repeats, an Indian Spotted Eagle and a Shikra were recorded.

January 31, 2020

9. ICRISAT

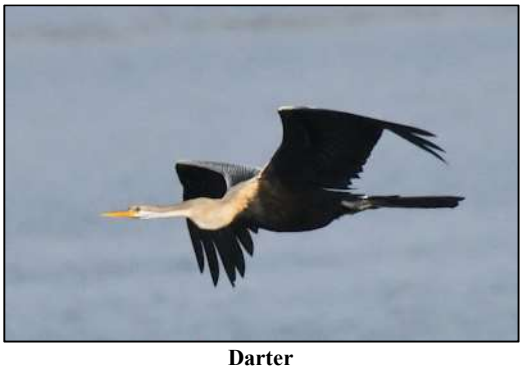
With some help from Dr Chitra Shanker, we got an opportunity to bird at the ICRISAT campus and to record the status of waterbodies.

ICRISAT Main Lake

Lake-1: The main ICRISAT Lake: The bamboo, *Acacia nilotica*, *Lecaenea leucocephala*, the Tamarind tree community on the walkway bund towards the water, and a few more trees on the islands in the water were occupied by Painted Storks and Grey Herons for nesting. Many Darters were perched on the trees and were seen preening. Duck populations were very low compared to earlier visits. It was very pleasant watching the Painted Storks. Even though I have worked for years on this species, something always draws my attention: their activity of collecting the nesting material from the Tamarind trees and gliding close to the water surface as they returned with the nesting material in their beaks; at nest, when the partner arrives, their behaviour of greeting each other with bill-clattering; their neck movements up and down and side by side (*Alai Balai*).

Ruddy Shelduck

Other birds recorded here were Ruddy Shelducks, Spot-billed Ducks, Black-headed Ibises, Lesser Whistling-ducks, Grey Herons, Black-winged Stilts, Common Coots, Spot-billed Pelicans (only two) and Grey-headed Swamphens.



Darter

Lake-2: Red Lake: This is the waterbody where we suspected that the Spot-billed Pelicans were nesting. The waterbody has many trees on the islands, which seemed suitable; there were sufficient signs in earlier months that a Pelicanry was in the process of being established here. But in the whole of the ICRISAT campus, only 13 Spot-billed Pelicans were recorded, of which two were seen on the ICRISAT Lake and the remaining here at Red Lake.

Northern Pintail

This place also hosted some Northern Shovelers, Northern Pintails, Common Teals, Spot-billed Ducks and Black-crowned Night Herons. Some Grey Herons and a few pairs of Painted Storks were recorded nesting on the trees on these islands.

Northern Pintail

Grey Herons at Red Lake

Spot-billed Pelican

Lake-3: Suri Sehgal Lake: Passing through the fields and among the *Leucaena leucocephala* trees on either side, we reached this lake with very shallow water level, and recorded a few Cattle Egrets on the bunds at the edges of the water. Other than this, there was very little other bird life on this lake.

Suri Sehgal Lake surface covered by grass

We observed that the whole waterbody was occupied by grass grown in the water, leaving no open water and we observed very few birds on the edges of the bunds, close to the shallow waters.

One interesting observation at this location was some courtship behaviour between a pair of Black-shouldered Kites.

Black-shouldered Kite courtship behaviour

Lake-4: Mary Cummins Lake or Campus Ponds: These are three small pools with clear, open and still water, providing accommodation to Common Coots, Spot-billed Ducks and 3 Cormorants perching on the nearby *Ficus religiosa* tree.

A detailed list of water-dependent species from the above water bodies/wetlands is given below:

Sl No	Date		Jan 19, 2020		Jan 26, 2020					Jan 31, 2020
	Location/ Waterbody name		Manjeera WLS & Tallapally	Kandi Cheruvu	Annasagar Jogipet	Andole Cheruvu	Mehboobsagar Sangareddy	Nizam Talab, Nizampet	Patancheru Lake	ICRISAT
	Species Name	IUCN Status								
1	Little Grebe	LC	+	+	+		+	+	+	+
2	Spot-billed Pelican	NT								+
3	Great Cormorant	LC			+	+	+		+	+
4	Indian Cormorant	LC	+							
5	Little Cormorant	LC			+	+	+	+		+
6	Darter	NT	+			+			+	+
7	Black-crowned Night Heron	LC			+					+
8	Indian Pond Heron	LC	+		+	+	+	+	+	+
9	Purple Heron	LC	+			+		+	+	+
10	Grey Heron	LC	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
11	Cattle Egret	LC			+	+		+	+	+
12	Little Egret	LC	+	+	+	+	+		+	+
13	Intermediate Egret	LC	+	+	+	+				+
14	Large Egret	LC	+	+	+	+	+		+	+
15	Painted Stork	NT	+		+	+				+
16	Asian Openbill	LC	+	+					+	
17	Black-headed Ibis	NT	+		+	+	+	+		+
18	Red-naped Ibis	LC			+	+				+
19	Glossy Ibis	LC	+		+	+	+		+	+
20	Eurasian Spoonbill	LC	+	+	+					
21	Lesser Whistling-duck	LC			+	+	+	+		+
22	Bar-headed Goose	LC			+		+			+
23	Ruddy Shelduck	LC								+
24	Knob-billed Duck	LC			+	+	+			+
25	Cotton Pygmy-goose	LC	+		+	+				
26	Eurasian Wigeon	LC		+	+	+				
27	Gadwall	LC			+					
28	Common Teal	LC	+							
29	Spot-billed Duck	LC	+	+	+	+	+	+		+
30	Northern Pintail	LC			+	+			+	+
31	Garganey	LC		+	+					
32	Northern Shoveler	LC	+		+	+	+	+		+
33	Common Pochard	LC			+					
34	Ruddy-breasted Crake	LC						+		
35	White-breasted Waterhen	LC	+				+			+
36	Common Moorhen	LC					+			+
37	Grey-headed Swamphen	LC	+		+	+	+	+	+	+
38	Common Coot	LC	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
39	Pheasant-tailed Jacana	LC						+	+	
40	Bronze-winged Jacana	LC	+			+	+	+		+
41	Black-winged Stilt	LC	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
42	Small Pratincole	LC	+							
43	Red-wattled Lapwing	LC	+		+	+		+	+	+
44	Little Ringed Plover	LC		+						+
45	Kentish Plover	LC	+							
46	Black-tailed Godwit	NT		+						
47	Wood Sandpiper	LC	+	+	+					+
48	Common Sandpiper	LC	+	+		+				
49	Little Stint	LC	+							
50	Whiskered Tern	LC							+	

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	Species Name	IUCN Status								
51	Indian River Tern	NT	+	+	+	+	+		+	+
52	Brahminy Kite	LC	+							
53	Eurasian Marsh Harrier	LC	+	+	+	+			+	+
54	Osprey	LC				+				
55	Greater Spotted Eagle	VU	+			+	+		+	+
56	Indian Spotted Eagle	VU							+	
57	Common Kingfisher	LC	+							
58	White-breasted Kingfisher	LC	+		+		1			+
59	Pied Kingfisher	LC			+					
60	Barn Swallow	LC	+		+		+	+		+
61	Wire-tailed Swallow	LC				+			+	
62	Red-rumped Swallow	LC	+							+
63	White Wagtail	LC		+						
64	White-browed Wagtail	LC		+		+		+		
65	Paddyfield Pipit	LC	+	+					+	+
66	Richard's Pipit	LC	+	+	+					
67	Oriental Skylark	LC		+						
68	Ashy-crowned Sparrow Lark	LC	+		+			+	+	
69	Unidentified Herons & Egrets						+			
70	Unidentified Ducks				+		+			
71	Unidentified Waders				+					
72	Unidentified Swallows								+	
	Total Species		**40**	**23**	**40+**	**33**	**26+**	**20**	**25+**	**40**

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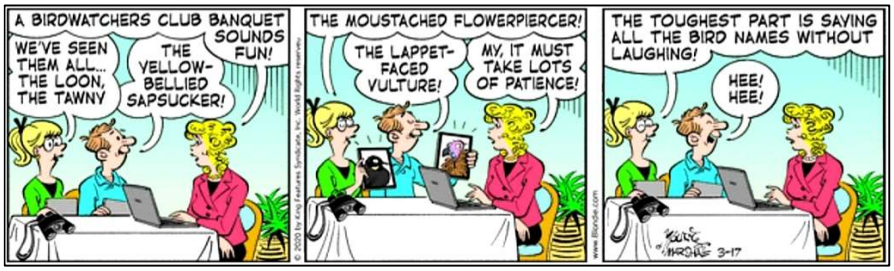
Bird Humour

Contributed by: JVD Moorty


A BIRDWATCHERS CLUB BANQUET SOUNDS FUN!
WE'VE SEEN THEM ALL... THE LOON, THE TAWNY
THE YELLOW-BELLIED SAPSUCKER!
THE MOUSTACHED FLOWERPIERCER!
THE LAPPET-FACED VULTURE!
MY, IT MUST TAKE LOTS OF PATIENCE!
THE TOUGHEST PART IS SAYING ALL THE BIRD NAMES WITHOUT LAUGHING!
HEE! HEE!

(From Blondie, by Dean Young)

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Bird of the Month

Text and Photo: Umesh Mani

Common Babbler (*Argya caudata*)

Common Babbler (Kolleru, January 2, 2020)

Order: Passeriformes
Family: Leiothrichidae
Genus: *Argya*
Species: *A. caudata*
Size: 23 cm

Description & distribution: The Common Babbler is a small babbler. Earlier placed in the genus *Turdoides*, it was moved to the genus *Argya* in 2018 after a comprehensive molecular phylogenetic study. It has warm buffish-brown or buffish-grey upperparts with profuse, marked streaking on its head, mantle and back, and unstreaked, paler buff underparts with some streaking on the sides of the breast. The eyes are dark and throat is pale – two features that separate it from the Striated Babbler – and the bill is slim and decurved. Another distinctive feature is its slim, long, graduated and finely cross-rayed olive-brown tail. Two subspecies are recognized, *A. c. eclipes*, seen from northern Pakistan to northwestern India, and the nominate *A. caudata*, seen in southern Pakistan, Nepal, Bangladesh, and almost all across India (including the Lakshadweep Islands). It is not seen in Sri Lanka or Myanmar. The sexes are alike.

Habitat & behaviour: The Common Babbler, like most other babblers, is gregarious and usually seen in groups ranging from six to twenty individuals. Its preferred habitat is sparse and low thorny scrub in dry regions. It is a noisy bird, moving around on the ground with other members of the group keeping watch from bush tops. It forages amidst the undergrowth by hopping along, often with tail raised, or scuttling around like rodents on the ground. Its flight is weak – just a few rapid wingbeats followed by a short glide on outspread wings and tail. The diet consists mainly of flower nectar, berries, grains and insects. Its call is a trilling *which-which-whichi-ri-ri-ri-ri*, while the alarm call is a high-pitched squeak, with the whole group joining in.

Nesting: The Common Babbler breeds generally between March and July, though it may irregularly breed at other times of the year too. The nest is a compact cup of grass, rootlets and twigs, usually built in low thorny scrub less than 2m from ground. The usual clutch consists of 3-4 glossy turquoise-coloured eggs. Both parents share nesting duties. The nests are often parasitized by the Pied Crested (Jacobin's) and the Hawk Cuckoos.

Local name: The Common Babbler is known as *'Chilchil'*, '*Sor', 'Genga', 'Chhota Genga'* or *'Dumri'* in Hindi, *'Chinna sida'* in Telugu, *'Huni'* in Tamil, and '*Chilappan'* in Malayalam.

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